

STICKFIGHTING

In the Swiss capital of Bern is one of the stickfighting worlds best kept secrets.

Matt Tucker travelled to Bern to interview and spend a week training with the Dog Brothers most active fighter, their Chief Instructor for Europe, Guru Benjamin 'Lonely Dog' Rittiner...And Guru Marc 'Crafty Dog' Denny gives a interesting insight into his very good friend and highly regarded Dog Brother.

When Benjamin first came to train with me (1997 or '98) with some students of his I was very impressed with how much he had absorbed on his own. We hit it off well, and he continued to come to train with me in LA and would assist me on seminars that I would give in Spain, England, and Italy. This, combined with his outstanding work ethic and natural talent enabled him to grow very well in DBMA even though he lived in Switzerland and I in California

Although we the Dog Brothers are known for an intense kind of fighting, we are about something much more than all that - something which is revealed through the fighting perhaps, but something that is not about the fighting. As Benjamin fought at the Gatherings, everyone was very impressed not only his skill as a fighter, but also for the man he showed himself to be.

Lonely



He made Dog Brother in the minimum number of Gatherings required (5).

As he continued to host me in Switzerland our friendship grew (likewise my friendship with his wonderful wife Cornelia) as did his skill and knowledge in DBMA - he became the only other person I have promoted to Guro in DBMA.

Because of the age disparity (about 20 years) I have almost paternal feelings for him which has allowed me to transcend the secretive nature I had about certain things when I was still fighting and teach him as if he were a son. Tomorrow is promised to no one, and if something were to happen to me he would be the one to step into my role in DBMA.

As I continued coming to Europe, I felt the desire that many people had to become part

of the Dog Brothers and I realized the difficulty of repeatedly flying to California for people in Europe. I discussed this with Benji and shared with him what I thought were the ingredients and building blocks necessary for a Dog Brothers Gathering. For several years we worked together to prepare the way. In the spring of 2006 we held an 'Invitational Gathering' to make sure that we had the nucleus of people necessary to establish the respect necessary for the 'Dog Brothers code' and were ready to take the next step. We were ready.

This past October first we held the first DB Gathering ever outside of Los Angeles. The plan was for all three founders of the Dog Brothers (now the governing body of the Dog Brothers known as 'The Council of Elders' because we are old), Top Dog (Eric), Salty Dog (Arlan) and me to witness the Gathering, but Salty had business matters that

Lonely Dog **FEATURE**



intervened and so it was only Top Dog and me. I proposed to Eric and Arlan that Benji become a member of The Council of Elders and they enthusiastically agreed.

Eric and I were very, very impressed with the fighting skill at the Euro Gathering. Even more important though was the strong Dog Brother feeling shown by all the fighters there, regardless of which system they came from. Indeed, we consider this Gathering to be one of the best Dog Brothers Gatherings ever - a very special day!

The Dog Brothers Gathering is now an established event and people fighting at the Gathering are eligible to be considered part of the Dog Brothers tribe - regardless of which system in which they train. To become a full Dog Brother, one must make it to the main Gathering in Los Angeles.

And so ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Guro Benjamin 'Lonely Dog' Rittiner: highly regarded Dog Brother, member of the DB Council of Elders, Guro in DBMA and head of our organization in Europe, and my very good friend.

- Marc 'Crafty Dog' Denny

DOG

FEATURE Lonely Dog**Matt Tucker: How did you first get involved with Martial Arts/Fighting?**

Ben Rittiner: My first contact with the martial arts was at school when I was around 8 years old. We had a project to make a short movie and some of the older children had the idea to make a short Kung Fu movie. Sadly I was one of the younger children tied to the tree awaiting the heroes (The older children), to come rescue us. This was when I first saw my first Ninja Shuriken/Throwing Star.

When I was around ten years old I got my first Nunchaku and played around a bit with it until I started my formal training 1984 with Karate. Even though I quit karate after only two years, I stayed true to the Japanese martial arts (Judo, Ju-Jitsu, and Ninpo) until 1994.

In the following years my main focus became the full contact fighting styles such as Boxing, Thai-Boxing and Sanda. Above all I felt comfortable as a boxer and attended a variety of boxing tournaments as an amateur boxer. And had some fighting experiences in these styles.

MT: How did you first come into contact with FMA and the Dog Brothers Martial Arts?

BR: Sometime between 1992 and 1993 whilst I was attending a Tai Kai Seminar in Luxembourg my teacher had a friend who trained in the Inosanto Blend so we went to his Gym to train for a couple of hours on some basics, Sumbrada and Heaven Six etc.

I became interested in Kali and I wanted to continue training in the Filipino Martial Arts but I couldn't find a teacher near me in Switzerland at the time. I started to collect as many instructional videos on FMA so I could continue to learn.



So it was in 1994 that I bought the Dog Brothers 'Real Contact Fighting' Series and it suddenly hit me 'That's cool, I want to do this' and realised that this was the direction I wanted to go, so I started to train with some friends for about 4 years with these videos.

MT: So this was before you had any direct contact with DBMA or Marc 'Crafty Dog' Denny?

BR: Exactly, until 1998 I trained from the videos. I would watch them again and again, hundreds of times, perfecting each individual move until the tapes eventually wore out! By then it was clear that if I wanted to go any further I would have to go to the USA to learn directly at the source. So I wrote a letter to the Dog Brothers address in Hermosa Beach California. Mark Denny replied to my letter and invited me over. Some months later I found myself in an aircraft headed to California.

MT: How did the training differ from what you had been doing on your own?

BR: It was pretty interesting, First Marc asked

fast I could adapt the material. Just at the 5th day he showed some material that I had really a hard time to do and he was quite glad to find something I could not do perfectly right from the beginning...All over all he was impressed that someone could learn so much from just videos.

This first training with Guro Crafty changed a lot in my understanding of Stick-fighting. As far as the fighting went I had already developed a pretty solid structure in what we call 'regular lead', that is with the stick in right hand and the same leg forward and used this to shuffle forward and back.

He taught me to use both leads, means that I could fight with the right foot forward but also with the left foot as a lead. This knowledge of using triangular footwork to gain an advantageous position helped me make my fighting game more alive. This was a very important lesson for me.

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The most important knowledge that I received through all the years of training with Guro Crafty was the understanding of the various fighting systems and the capacity to analyse my opponents.

me to do some Carenza (shadow boxing with a stick). He commented that I moved quite well and he asked me who my teacher was, to which my reply was 'My teacher is VCR!'.

While the 5 day PTP we covered a lot of material and mostly he was surprised how

through all the years of training with Guro Crafty was the understanding of the various fighting systems and the capacity to analyse my opponents. To understand that I will face different structures and the better I can analyse them and the more solutions I have against these different structures the better it

is. It's truly like Sugar Ray Leonard once said "You don't beat the man, you beat his style."

Guro Crafty is a great teacher and when he fought was feared opponent, but what I admire the most when I think about him is his great capability to analyse structures and through that of course the fighters. There is truly a reason why he is the 'Crafty Dog'...

I always was a talented fighter. Guro Crafty supported me in my development as an intelligent fighter. I will never forget the sentence I heard one day from Grand Tuhon Leo Gaje: "easy to be hard, hard to be smart".

MT: Was it hard to find training partners to help you keep progressing when you came back home?

BR: It was harder to keep them because in the beginning we would train just a few techniques and we sparred a lot. I think that in those days because of my inexperience but strong motivation to make the sparring full contact, I believe I may have pushed things a little to hard an painful and this is why people gave up and stopped training

Today I know how important it is to expand the training in an intelligent and careful manner. Efficiency is not the most important thing in training, I think it is just as important to motivate the student and to make the training fun, one of the basics concepts in the Dog Brother Martial Arts is that the training should be 'fit, fun, and functional'.

MT: How important is it to spar in stick fighting, and when should it begin?

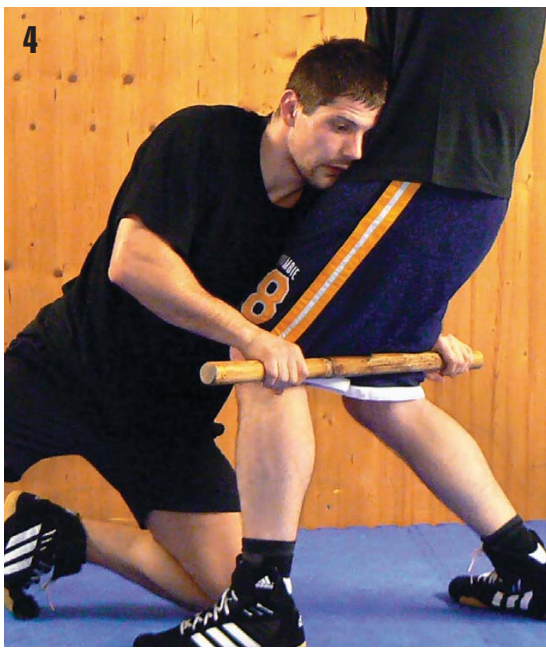
BR: My opinion is that sparring is an important part of training. One must just carefully build

while it could become dangerous very quickly or though many mistakes could slip into the training. Its different from student to student. For example, if a student has no experience then he should perhaps wait longer than for example someone who takes up boxing. In boxing you can start with a easy sparring from day one. Stick-fight sparring could be more dangerous and the student become injured specifically when the real stick and little or no protective gear is used. However, it is important to not use to much protective gear or a padded stick as the student then learns a false sense of danger.

This is the reason that I developed special drills to develop the students skills for sparring, for example Conceptional Sparring. Therefore I believe it is critical that the student has a solid foundation in the basics.

In general I think most students should wait about 6 months before the start sparring but sometimes you may get a beginner who is a natural fighter who does not care about bruises so he can jump in to sparring a bit earlier. But I believe it's better to build up a student without getting him too much bruises in the beginning. The difficulty is not to break



FEATURE Steve Morris

the students spirit as too much pain too early will cause the student to quit. It always easy to teach fighters to fight and much harder to get regular people to do a Gathering. The latter is the most interesting goal for me personally as a teacher.

This is the reason I have developed special exercises to prepare the student for sparring. One of these is the conditional sparring drill. It is very important to me that the student has a solid basic education. In general I give a student 6 months before they can think about sparring, of course that can vary depending on the student.

MT: Why 'Lonely Dog'?

BR: It was because of the sense of tribe I felt in California amongst the DB group. It was such a great warm feeling to be part of this tribe at the Gatherings that when I flew back and saw this huge distance between California and Switzerland I did feel somewhat

1. Matt has Ben in the 'Plum'.

2. Ben blocks Matts knees with his stick...

3. ...and breaks Matt's grip..

4. Allowing the double leg shoot...

5. ...and take down.

6. Establishing side control...

7. ...for the 'Fang Choke'!

on my own and isolated from the 'pack'.

MT: Can you explain the sense of tribe within the Dog Brothers?

BR: To fight like we do is very intense and also dangerous. To make it happen we need something that controls the energy. If it were just a competition to see who is best it would be extremely dangerous and therefore you would need a lot of rules, however the idea is not to limit the person through the rules but if

you have no rules, sticks, less protection then you need something else that controls the violence. So the idea that we are one tribe, we are all friends and we all want to learn and grow together entails the 'safety' in our fighting and it's extremely special. In normal competition you don't get people fighting and then afterwards discussing the fight at the side of the mat. In my amateur boxing days I was

very nervous when I competed yet there were rules, head gear and protection. I was more concerned about winning, I did not know my opponent and did not know what kind of person he was. At the 'Gatherings' I have never felt this kind of pressure. I always feel supported by the group and we are all there to work together. Even if I have to tap it was an educational experience without bitter aftertaste.

MT: How dangerous is Real Contact Stick Fighting?

BR: It depends how clever the fighter is! Actually it can be quite dangerous. We have sticks and we hit each other, but there are 2 things that reduce the risk.

One is the code, to not break your opponent spiritually or physically.

We want to show him his weaknesses but if he is stunned we won't take the final blow that may seriously injure them.

The second is how you fight. I want my students to fight in an intelligent manner and to have and use a strategy. It is surely extreme the way we fight and many fighters hesitate to make the decision to test themselves to determine just how "manly" they are. This is a fair reason to take part and many people walk away from a Gathering a different and more confident person.

For me personally it is more about demonstrating control, dominating a fight through an intelligent strategy and the better I apply this the

lower the risk of injury. But, a fight is a fight and in Real Contact Stick Fighting there is always a certain risk. If you take the risk away then it would not be the same experience and through this risk you make bigger steps in the progression as a martial artist.

MT: How do you prepare for a gathering?

BR: It changed over the years. At least 8 weeks of preparation both the cardio and technique. I tend to keep my cardio at a basic level. It is more important to have your head right and to be ready for the Gathering mentally and be prepared with a solid strategy. There were fights that I had where I had just recovered from flu and had 5 days to prepare to fight. You cannot build any cardio in such a short amount of time but you can do a lot of mental preparation in 5 days. So over the years I attempt to keep my Cardio at a base level, I am always working condition and power so the mental game is more important to me in the time leading up to the gathering.

Many people spar very hard up to a week before a fight which can be dangerous as you can walk into a fight already injured, personally I stop hard sparring 6 to 8 weeks prior to a fight.

MT: How does the use of rhythm training (training to music) improve a student's performance with regards to fighting in a Gathering?

BR: Again this varies from fighter to fighter and some people just have no rhythm! Someone does not need to have rhythm to be a good fighter. If someone has no rhythm I don't force them to train with rhythm but if they have a bit of feel for it then it can help a great deal.

I have developed something called the 'Boogie Woogie' as a specific shadow boxing drill and since I have done this I have discovered to break rhythm, maintain rhythm and control the rhythm of a fight. I believe it is a deciding factor in fighting to dictate the rhythm you want during the fight and how to change that rhythm to disrupt your opponent and force him to create an opening.

MT: The Dog Brother fights are frequently criticized as being nothing but a wild slug-fest that lacks any technique or finesse. What do you think about this? What is the contact between 'full contact' and 'Real Contact Stick Fighting'?

BR: To be honest, my knowledge of full contact tournaments with full protective gear relatively small. Of course I have seen these types of fights and also seen how the fighters train. To be honest these fights are exchanges of blows and one must look very hard



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to see any strategy or finesse.

What a person can see in these fights, is conditioning, a pair of nice looking techniques but no complete concept. If you were to have a RCSF in this manner it would be the most direct route to the nearest hospital.

A person needs to have a certain ability and a minimum of strategy in order to come through one of these fights without injury. Most martial artists have problems in a real fight to recognize techniques or strategy. It takes a certain 'fighters eye' to recognize the details of how technique and timing is brought to bear as everything is happening so fast.

That is one of the advantages to the Dog Brother series of DVD's. The technique is not only shown and taught but also shown in a clip from a Real Contact Stick Fight, or as Crafty puts it "If you see it taught, you see it fought".

MT: Is it true that anyone can train in the DBMA style but refrain from Real Contact Stick Fighting?

BR: Absolutely, DBMA is a martial art that anyone can train in but naturally not everyone will want to fight RCSF. Indeed, MOST people who train in DBMA are what we call 'Practitioners' interested in our mission statement of "Walk as a Warrior for all your days." Just as the production automobiles that we all drive have profited from the experiences gained in racing, the practitioner of DBMA gains from the experience gained by others during RCSF. RCSF is an important

Above
Matt, Ben & some of the Swiss clan.

part of the DBMA but it is not the only thing that DBMA has to offer. The practitioner program is the base of the DBMA. A program that allows people who wish to train to gain something in the area of self defence, physical fitness or for spiritual fulfilment.

MT: What is this Practitioners Program?

BR: The practitioners program covers all aspects of the DBMA. In this program a practitioner can learn to utilize the stick, empty hand techniques or other aspects like self defence.

MT: What is the primary focus of your instruction?

BR: My biggest passion remains the stick-fight in all it's possibilities. I do still gladly instruct empty hand techniques. In both areas what fascinated me most was how to find a way to deal with another martial artists in a method that is tactically advanced. I probe my own boundaries and that of my opponents to establish where they are and how to grow beyond them. This viewpoint guides my own training as well as how I instruct. This is why the majority of the

less in self defence as in the many facets of the ritual confrontation.

MT: How do you want to see DBMA Europe grow from here on?

BR: I am really happy to see whats happened over the last two years and if it carries on like this then I am very much looking forward to it. The training groups at the moment are pretty small and I am really excited to see them grow and develop. I am glad that the sense of tribe is allowing the different groups to work together. Last year Top Dog and Crafty Dog came to open our first European Dog Brothers Gathering here in Bern and I was very surprised to see how much interest we had with 42 fighters. It was a long day with a lot of fights. I am also seeing a unique fighting style appearing for the European Dog Brothers much like in Boxing with European boxing being different from American and American is different from Mexican boxing etc. I am already seeing a direction that will make us different (laughs)!

Also Dog Brothers Martial Arts has a lot to offer the practitioners (those that don't wish

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martial artists who come to me or to one of my seminars are looking to find something in themselves and grow as martial artists or simply seek to have a balance to the daily life.

Therefore the focus of my instruction lays

to fight) with a full self-defence system and healing arts for both men and women and I would like to see this grow along side those who wish to fight at the 'Gatherings'. Within the system we organize this under the headings of 'Ritual' and 'Reality' which are

combined to yield a 'Totality'. The Real Contact Stickfighting falls within 'Ritual', street application matters are within 'Reality'. (There is also a Law Enforcement/Military component to the system) Some DBMA people are more interested in one, some are more interested in the other, some seek to blend the two and some people start with one, but wind up focusing on the other. This applies to our instructors as well! To have the adrenal state experience of Real Contact Stickfighting I think is very useful in helping people to understand what they are capable of and what skills need to be capable of in real time for the street. In summary I would say that we like to let people explore and grow as they will.

MT: Finally, Can you tell us a bit about your UK seminars planned later this year?

BR: Yes I am very happy to be teaching in the UK on a number of occasions this year. I will be in Aberdeen in June, Glasgow in August and

Bristol in October. The plan is to give the participants an overview about DBMA. This time I want to focus on Single Stick. I'm going to cover different areas with the single stick. There will be our blend of Kali and Krabi Krabong (Los Triques), Clinchwork with the Stick but also some Self Defence material.

MT: Thank you for a fantastic weeks training and I look forward to our next adventure.

BR: Woof woof



Dog Brothers

For further information on DBMA and their classes, seminars and workshops please contact Instructor Matt Tucker

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